

Europe's Destiny in the Asian 21st Century



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Despite two world wars, the 20th century was good for Europe. By the end of the century, Europe had the richest and most socially harmonious societies in the world. After the end of the Cold War, Europe joined the US in believing that it had reached the “end of history”. Hence, it was perfectly normal for most Europeans to believe that they could just switch on their “auto-pilot” mechanism and cruise into the 21st century without making any major strategic adjustments.



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The main thesis of this article is that as we move from the American 20th century to the Asian 21st century, Europe will have to switch off its “auto-pilot” mechanisms and make at least three major strategic U-turns to cope with a different global environment. Yet, to make these U-turns, Europe will first have to psychologically accept that the 21st century will be the Asian century. The rest of the world outside the West, which represents 88 percent of the world’s population has begun to do so. To the surprise of my German publisher, Springer Nature, my latest book, *The Asian 21st Century*, has been downloaded over two million times in over 160 countries.

Europe must also accept that this return of the Asian century is a perfectly natural development. From the year 1 to 1820, the two largest economies of the world were always those of China and India. The past 200 years of Western domination of world history has been an aberration. All aberrations come to a natural end. Since Western powers can no longer dominate the world as they used to, it should be natural and logical for Europe to consider making strategic adjustments, even strategic U-turns.

Interests, not ideology

Lord Palmerston said “We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.” Palmerston was absolutely right. Interests come ahead of friendships in geopolitical calculations. Yet, many Europeans believe that they should sacrifice their own national interests in favour of friendship with the US.

One core national interest of European economies is to have access to the world’s biggest markets. And the world’s biggest markets will be in Asia, especially in China. Here are two statistics that drive this home. In 2010, the size of the US retail goods market was \$4 trillion, more than double that of China’s, at \$1.8 trillion. Yet, by 2020, China’s retail goods market was \$6 trillion, larger than that of the US, at \$5.5 trillion. The second statistic is about middle class populations. In 2000, the total middle class population of the three major Asian growth economies (China, India and ASEAN, the new CIA) was only 75 million. By 2020, it had grown to 1.1 billion and by 2030, it’s expected to reach 2.5 billion. Without good access to these markets, Europe’s industries will languish.

Europe is now under pressure to cut off or reduce its links with China. This is demonstrated by the fierce criticism that Chancellor Olaf Scholz and his business delegation received from the Anglo-Saxon media when they visited China in November 2022. Many of these criticisms said that Germany had sacrificed its “values” in developing closer economic ties with China. So could Europe integrate itself with the rest of Asia and ignore China? The answer is no. The Chinese economy is now deeply integrated with the rest of Asia. Here’s another statistic that drives this home. In 2000, US’ trade with the ten ASEAN countries was \$135 billion, more than three times China’s trade with ASEAN at \$40 billion. By 2021, US’ trade with ASEAN had grown less than three times to \$394 billion but China’s trade with ASEAN had exploded over twenty times to \$878 billion. With the launch of the world’s largest Free Trade Agreement, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in January 2022, East Asia will be even more integrated with China’s economy.

The first strategic U-turn that Europe will therefore have to make is to decide that access to the new integrated markets of East Asia is a strategic priority. Hence, more European leaders should emulate Chancellor Olaf Scholz and lead business delegations to China and East Asia. How many will have the political courage to do so?



Geography is destiny

The second strategic U-turn that Europe has to make is to acknowledge that geography is destiny. This is why geo-politics is a combination of two words: geography and politics. And geography is more important as geography will decide where the biggest threat to Europe will come from.

China is far away geographically from Europe. Hence China doesn’t threaten Europe. By contrast, Africa is geographically closer. The biggest long-term threat to Europe will therefore come from the demographic explosion in Africa. In 1950, Europe’s population was double that of Africa’s. By 2100, Africa’s population will be ten times that of Europe’s. Nigeria’s population could be larger than that of China’s.

If Europe remains affluent and Africa doesn’t succeed in development, there will be floods of African migrants, especially Muslim North African migrants, to Europe. In their book, *The Light that Failed*, Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes document in detail how the inflow of illegal migrants has fueled the rise of anti-liberal populist forces in Europe. Unless Africa develops, more illegal migrants will come. Quite naturally, more Donald Trump-like leaders will emerge in Europe.

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Clearly, because of geography, the main strategic imperative of Europe is to develop Africa. The best natural partner for Europe in Africa is the largest new investor in African economic development: China. However, there will be a complication. The US has clearly decided to launch a geopolitical contest to prevent China from replacing it as the number one power in the world. Anyone who doubts this should read my book, *Has China Won?* Hence, the US will object to cooperation between Europe and China in Africa.

In trying to prevent China’s rise, the US is acting like any other great power in world history. Its primary goal is to protect its own interest in remaining number one. However, due to geographical differences, this is not necessarily Europe’s paramount interest. The big strategic question Europe will have to confront is this: should it put its own national interests first? Or those of the US?



Compromise is ethical

A combination of the principles embedded in the first two strategic U-turns suggested above will also lead to Europe considering a strategic U-turn in an even more sensitive geopolitical challenge: its long-term relationship with Russia. At the end of the Cold War, there was a lot of promise that Europe could work with Russia to fulfil the vision of Gorbachev, to build a “common house of Europe”. For complex reasons, the European Union (EU) failed to achieve this vision. Instead, the relationship between the EU and Moscow are worse than they were during the Cold War (where there were civilized dialogues between leaders like Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt with their Soviet counterparts).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is illegal. It violates international law. It should be condemned. The people of Ukraine should be helped. Yet, while all this is true, there’s still a difference between Asian and European perspectives on Ukraine. Asians don’t see the world in black and white terms. They see complexity. Most Europeans see the Ukraine conflict as

a black and white issue. Russia is evil. The West is virtuous, defending democracy and self-determination in Ukraine. Asians don’t see the Ukraine conflict in black and white terms. And, by the way, Asia includes the world’s largest democracy, India, and the third largest democracy, Indonesia. Neither has condemned Russia. Neither has imposed sanctions on Russia.

At the same time, the war in Ukraine has also impoverished millions in the global South. Hence, many Asians believe that it may actually be ethical to seek a compromise solution that will alleviate the sufferings of the Ukrainian people and the global poor. As of now, it would be suicidal for any European leader to advocate a compromise solution in Ukraine, even though there’s a strong ethical case for it. Hence, what might be a sensible and ethical U-turn for Europe to consider is politically impossible.

As a friend of Europe, who would like Europe to remain strong and free over the long-term, I can only suggest that Europe will have to consider painful U-turns now to prevent long-term pain later. And, sadly, if Europe refuses to consider such painful alternatives, it will be behaving like the proverbial ostrich: putting its head into the sand to protect itself. ■

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